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Metaphysical and Earthly Love in Brontë's Wuthering Heights

Autora: Elena Cuetos Cruz

Tutora: Viorica Patea Birk

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Resumen

Este ensayo ahonda en los dos tipos de amor representados en la novela de Emily Brontë *Cumbres Borrascosas*. Está centrado en el amor terrenal que Catalina siente por Linton y como la sociedad tiene un papel importante en el nacimiento de este sentimiento. Por otro lado, se comparará con el amor metafísico entre Catalina y Heathcliff, enfocándose en sus rasgos más destacados, que son el sentido de unidad y la inmortalidad.

Palabras clave: metaphysical love, revenge, oneness, eternity, duality

Abstract

This essay explores the two different kinds of love represented in Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. It centers on the earthy love that Catherine feels for Linton and how society plays a role on the formation of this feeling. On the other hand, it will be compared with the metaphysical love that Catherine and Heathcliff share, focusing on its most outstanding traits, which are the sense of oneness and its immortality.

Key words: amor metafísico, venganza, unidad, eternidad, dualidad

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1. Introduction

Throughout the years love has been a constant theme in literature, represented in many forms: courtly love, romantic love, erotic love... But there is a classic English novel, considered by many a masterpiece, that brings love to another level: *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Its treatment of love and relationships is so crude and blunt that it was considered scandalous in Victorian society when it was released. One of the most remarkable aspects of this novel that has captivated generations is the way it portrays the deep and eternal love of Catherine and Heathcliff, which has become part of popular culture with many film adaptations and references in music and literature. The author takes the platonic idea of metaphysical love to create one of the most famous couples in literary history. With this novel Brontë becomes a pioneer of the gothic genre, shaping Heathcliff as a Byronic hero who places more importance in his feelings than in social norms.

This essay explores the two kinds of love represented in the novel through the quotes of the characters involved and the dimension they have. In order to do this, I will first focus on Catherine and Edgar Linton's earthly love and then on the metaphysical love she shares with Heathcliff.

2. The Earthy Love of Catherine and Linton

There are two lovers in the heart of Catherine: Heathcliff and Edgar Linton.

However, the feelings she has for them are very different. When she is a child she is in love with Heathcliff and spends most of her time with him, but when she meets Edgar Linton, she starts to develop feelings for him as well. There is a duality between these two lovers. We could say they are both parts of Catherine, she is torn between Heathcliff, who would represent nature and Linton, who represents culture (Borg, 5) Catherine describes what she feels for Linton to Nelly, her housekeeper when he proposes to her and she accepts.

‘Why do you love him, Miss Cathy?’ ‘Nonsense, I do that’s sufficient.’ ‘By no means; you must say why?’ ‘Well, because he is handsome, and pleasant to be with.’ ‘Bad!’ was my commentary. ‘And because he is young and cheerful.’ ‘Bad, still.’ ‘And because he loves me.’ ‘Indifferent, coming there.’ ‘And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband.’ ‘Worst of all. And now, say how you love him?’ ‘As everybody loves You’re silly, Nelly.’ ‘Not at all Answer.’ ‘I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says. I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely and altogether. There now!’ (Brontë, 99)

In her love declaration we can see she is infatuated with the image that Edgar Linton represents. He is of a higher social status than her, rich and well-mannered, which makes him very attractive to Catherine, but, as Nelly remarks, those are not important points to marry someone, as love has nothing to do with external things. Catherine then gets angry and tries to explain that her love for him is real saying she

loves everything he does but still fails, as this can be seen more as an infatuation over a new discovery than a feeling of pure and real love. When asked by Nelly about her love for Heathcliff in comparison with these new feelings she has for Edgar Linton she declares:

My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I AM Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being (Brontë, 104)

She is aware that this love she has for Linton is fleeting. Because this feeling has to do with the exterior of things, it changes as the appearance of things always change. She describes it perfectly with the metaphor of the leaves of the trees. On the other hand, her love for Heathcliff is solid and immutable, as a rock that is hidden behind everything, because it is something deep and based on the internal aspects of the person, with the soul. Catherine chooses to marry Linton not only to assure her social status but also as a way of helping Heathcliff to be free from his brother's slavery. It is important that in this decision she considers Heathcliff above everything else, as we can see when she tells Nelly she would not marry Edgar if she had to be separated from Heathcliff.

Every Linton on the face of the earth might melt into nothing before I could consent to forsake Heathcliff. Oh, that's not what I intend that's not what I mean! I shouldn't be Mrs. Linton were such a price demanded! (Brontë, 103).

Catherine thinks that if she marries Heathcliff they will become beggars but, if she marries Linton instead, she can help Heathcliff by giving him money from Linton. There is a paradox in this choice, as Catherine, who knows Heathcliff very well and

knows he is full of pride, should be aware that he would not accept money from Linton, especially after their marriage, when their enmity would grow even more (Levin, 15). However, she does not regret marrying Edgar Linton, even when Heathcliff returns. When she is dying and Heathcliff comes to see her, she does not tell him she feels regretful, but leaves the decision of her doing right or wrong to Heathcliff:

If I've done wrong I'm dying for it. It is enough! you left me too but I won't upbraid you! I forgive you. Forgive me! (Brontë, 206)

The reason why Catherine does not feel regretful is that she needs the security of being wealthy and socially acceptable, as she is someone who wishes for power. We can see this when she tells Nelly that by marrying Edgar she can become “the greatest lady in neighbourhood” (Borg, 9). Catherine needs this double nature of culture and civilization that Linton offers her and her wilderness and nature that Heathcliff represents, she cannot live only through one of them. This is represented in Catherine's grave where she is buried in between her two lovers (Borg, 10).

Edgar is a character that represents the Victorian values of the time. He would be the perfect husband according to the social expectations of that age: he is rich, has a high social status, owns a large property, knows about etiquette, is handsome and well-mannered... He falls in love with Catherine but his feelings for her are also external, they are not as deep as those of Heathcliff. He tries to please his wife when she is mad or sick and spoils her all the time, but their connection is ruled by Edgar's own vision of the world, which is not wild and free but trapped by social norms, which does not let him feel as profoundly, as we can see in his relationship with her dear sister, that is tainted when she marries Heathcliff. He does not care for her anymore because she has “broken the rules”, and he puts his thoughts on social expectations before his feelings of

love towards her (Goldstone, 183). Heathcliff is also aware of the kind of feelings Linton has for Catherine, and explains them to Nelly in this passage where he declares his love for Catherine:

For every thought she spends on Linton she spends a thousand on me! ... If he loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn't love as much in eighty years as I could in a day. And Catherine has a heart as deep as I have: the sea could be as readily contained in that horsetrough as her whole affection be monopolised by him. Tush! He is scarcely a degree dearer to her than her dog, or her horse. It is not in him to be loved like me: how can she love in him what he has not?' (Brontë, 190)

Heathcliff knows that Linton lacks the intense feelings both he and Catherine share, and thinks that Catherine has more interest in him than in Linton because of the similar feelings they share.

3. The Metaphysical Love of Catherine and Heathcliff

Catherine and Heathcliff's love is the most important aspect of the novel. This kind of love is very different from the earthly or worldly love Catherine has for Linton. This is a metaphysical love that has nothing to do with the exterior, society's norms and values. It is a higher love that transcends everything. Plato wrote about it in his Symposium and illustrated it in his Androgynous myth. He represents it as an ideal love, where one soul is broken in two and tries to search its missing part to get united with it and completed again. This love cannot be changed or destroyed because it is ideal. Fernández Iglesias describes this type of platonic union as a lover that wants his soul to be completed and tries to merge with his loved one so get a sense of

completeness and permanent union (102). This sense of oneness, of the same soul that lives inside two different people, is what best describes Catherine and Heathcliff's feelings for each other. There are numerous quotes in the mouth of these two characters that describe this type of love. In the case of Heathcliff, this yearning for belonging and completeness is so extreme that when Catherine, his other half dies, he does not want to live anymore, as he feels terribly lonely and calls out her ghost to take him away with her:

Be with me always take any form drive me mad! only DO not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I CANNOT live without my life! I CANNOT live without my soul!' (Brontë, 213)

Heathcliff feels she is part of his soul and when she dies he becomes empty, since this important part of himself is not there anymore. He does not even mind becoming mad as he feels life for him is an "abyss", a place where he just falls and has no bottom, it is endless suffering. This makes him want to take revenge on Edgar, because he thinks it is his fault that he and Catherine could not be together, but this is not true, as it was Catherine who chose to marry Edgar over Heathcliff. Also, it was Catherine who didn't fight against her illness but preferred to take revenge on both lovers as she says she will try to break their hearts by breaking her own. Catherine ought to be the person Heathcliff should revenge himself upon, but because he loved her so much, he chose to lay the blame on everyone else instead, in this case on Edgar (Levin, 18). Catherine also talks about this feeling in her famous quote "I am Heathcliff" (Brontë, 104) where she tries to explain Nelly that their connection is so strong that she can feel his feelings, if he feels pain so she does, as their souls are the same. The world for her without Heathcliff is also meaningless as well as for him:

If all else perished, and HE remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it. (Brontë, 104)

They both feel there is an afterlife where their souls can be reunited again and form one. Immortality of the soul, along with the sense of oneness are the most remarkable characteristics of metaphysical love. Catherine expresses her feelings of an afterlife to Nelly in this passage:

surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here? (Brontë, 104)

This love is so strong that Catherine prefers her soul union with Heathcliff than her union with God in heaven, as she describes in her dream to Nelly:

“If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable ... heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy” (Brontë, 102)

This passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For Buchen, in this fragment Wuthering Heights represents her childhood union with Heathcliff. He describes the separation of the lovers as the separation of a child from God and his loss of heaven (67). Conventional heaven without Heathcliff is hell to Catherine and she becomes an outcast from that paradise because she already has found her home and achieved "mutual immortality" with her lover. Their interchangeable souls have created a state of self-sufficiency which excludes the soul's other partner, God (Buchen, 69). For Borg, on the other hand, in this dream heaven represents the Grange, the place where she will go

after marrying Edgar, which she sees as an ideal place. But once in, she realizes this is not her place, she is unhappy without Heathcliff, who is connected here with Wuthering Heights (Borg, 8).

This longing to be in Wuthering Heights with Heathcliff is seen again later when she locks herself in her room for three days and becomes delirious. She opens the window and says that she can see Wuthering Heights from it and talks to Heathcliff. Windows have an important symbolism in this novel, they represent a contrast between two worlds. In this passage they mark the separation between Catherine's reality and her desire. They also announce her imminent death, when she travels to another reality. They are also present in the beginning of the novel when Mister Lockwood sees Catherine's ghost trying to enter by the window. They represent a channel that connects the world of the supernatural with reality. They, along with doors, also represent imprisonment, as many of these characters are imprisoned by their own decisions in life.

4. Conclusion

This novel portrays two types of love and how they can coexist in a single person. Inside Catherine's heart there is a worldly existence that feels meaningless to her, but she still participates in it through the feelings she has for Edgar Linton, which are a product of her social expectations and ideals. On the other hand, this kind of love feels very small and weak contrasted with the deep and pure love she has for Heathcliff. This metaphysical love is very accurately described in Catherine and Heathcliff's feelings for each other. They constantly talk about their love as something deep and beyond this Earth. Their feelings of emptiness without each other and their longing to be united again in an afterlife are mentioned throughout the novel.

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